Held in place

Can creativity help to preserve memories of landscape and love in a tangible way?

You're sitting on a bench overlooking a beach. It's a perfect day of unblemished blue sky and sun that brings just enough warmth to feel comfortable. Playing in the sand you see a young mother and child, both cosy in Fair Isle jumpers, running and laughing in the winter sunshine. For a moment, your joyful observations are punctuated with a bittersweet awareness of the passage of time – a yearning for days gone by. Perhaps you remember outings with your now-grown children, or are reminded of being a child yourself, playing with your own mother.

All of life is built on memories. Even when embracing the present moment, still woven within it will be the influences and experiences that have shaped you. *Medical News Today* notes that, while nostalgia can be positive, it may also trigger sadness. But is there a peace to be found in knowing that memories are forever woven into the landscape, eternally connecting you to those who came before and will come after? And is it possible to preserve those memories within tangible items that bring calm and comfort?

Landscapes within

Emma Pruen (below), retreat host and author of *Wild Self: 400 Transformational Nature Experiences in Britain*, believes inhabiting memories through Shamanic drum journeying is a way to make positive connections to the past. 'When I lead people on a journey I start by asking them to imagine a place in nature that they know,' she says. 'I don't mean an imagined mossy glade in the heart of the forest, but a place they are deeply connected to.' Emma's drum journeys have taken her to several childhood homes, including the desert in Egypt, and now she endeavours to bring this sense of connection with joyful memories to others.

But what happens when you revisit memories in person, only to find the place has changed? If you drive past a childhood home, for example, and find it altered by a new family. Emma suggests writing things down: 'I was completely rocked to return to the house I lived in while in Egypt, only to see the beautiful villa and the garden my mother had lovingly planted reduced to a sandy hole in the ground, ready for a block of flats to be built on it. It made me think deeply about my memories. If something doesn't exist in the material world, what are my memories of it? An illusion? Yet they exist in me.' This trip lit the spark of Emma's second book. 'All that I learned from living in Egypt had to go somewhere. If I didn't write it down, it would disappear and cease to exist,' she says. This ceasing to exist is perhaps where the sadness dwells. Yet, by preserving memories on the page or revisiting them by walking the same places, there is a quiet knowing that precious past moments live on. This awareness can bring comfort.



Kept in colour

Preserving the journey of motherhood is something natural dyer, author, educator and mother of three Rebecca Desnos knows well. 'My natural dyeing is intricately woven into my journey as a mother. I have dyeing memories attached to each child,' she says.

Before Rebecca became a mother she was dyeing with powdered natural dye extracts. But while the colours were beautiful, it felt like something was missing. 'After my first baby was born, I started foraging for local plants to make dye,' she says. 'I would go for walks with my son and we would collect alder cones,



PHOTOGRAPHY: (LEFT) CHARLOTTEMACPHERSON.CO.UK. (RIGHT) REBECCA DESNOS







PHOTOGRAPHY: (ABOVE) REBECCA DESNOS. RIGHT: LISA WILLIMEN

acorns and dandelions together. Then we would come home and I'd start working on dye experiments during his nap.'

When Rebecca's second baby was born, she was exploring plant pounding. 'This is when you place leaves and flowers between layers of pre-treated fabric and carefully hammer to transfer the dyes and shapes of plants,' she explains. 'At the time we lived in a flat and I grew lots of dye plants on our balcony. I remember spending time out there with him nestled on me in the baby carrier, gently swaying to help him fall asleep.'

By the time Rebecca's third child came along, she was the proud owner of an actual garden and excited at the opportunity to expand the selection of dyes she grew. She did much of the gardening with her daughter held close. 'This is a common theme for me,' Rebecca says. 'I've done everything with my babies on my chest, from foraging for plants to writing natural dye books, dyeing and gardening.'

This entwinement of Rebecca's experiences of motherhood and creative journey has nurtured a tangible way to hold onto memories. 'When I see photos of an old dye project, I can remember what my children were doing at that time and who helped with each one,' she says. 'Several years ago I decorated a cotton cardigan for my youngest using flowers, which was a lovely way to preserve memories of our time spent together in the garden.' Now four, one of her daughter's favourite things to do is to pick dye flowers to pound onto fabric (using a rounded stone instead of a hammer). Rebecca says, 'It feels like a dream to see her potter around in the sun with a little basket and collect flowers.' Not only is Rebecca preserving her own memories, which nurtures a sense of acceptance for the passage of time, but her daughter is continuing that journey.

Generational ties

For textile artist, writer and photographer Ellie Beck, who lives and works surrounded by the forest in which she grew up, memories of childhood are deeply embedded throughout her work. She explains, 'When I watch the light and shadow of trees, bark, leaves I'm reminded of the small subtle shifts of my memories, my thoughts, my emotions about my mother and her work as an artist and connection to the land.'

As a motherless mother, Ellie still mourns and ponders how someone can shape you so much. She says holding pieces of textile that her mother dyed or stitched reminds her that the small works we create can become a tangible connection to past and future. 'These small things can't be overlooked as a powerful moment in both the process of making and stitching, and also in the finished piece,' she says. 'I know the work I create today will become part of my own children's landscapes.'

She continues, 'Stitching something new that will become an heirloom while nourishing my family now – hugs from quilts, directly warming someone with something I've made – feels





like big work, even though it's quiet, small, gentle.'

For Ellie, the slow, methodical act of creation offers an opportunity to imbue the fabric with memories. These memories are then transferred to the person holding, wearing or using that creation, unfolding a deep sense of belonging to something bigger: a sense of knowing your life experiences will be forever acknowledged.

Material memories

Feeling the presence of memories in the material world is something weaver Fran Pike understands deeply. Wandering the waterways aboard her narrowboat, *Laura Maisie*, she is constantly inspired by the reflection of memories in the ever-changing scenery, which quite literally entwines its way into her creations.

'Living so close to nature gives me endless inspiration,' she says. 'From kingfishers and dragonflies to hedgerows, wildflowers, reflections and sunsets, weaving has become a way of holding my fleeting memories of place and time.' Travelling all over the country for the past eight years, Fran has experienced countless beautiful views and places, and keeps photographs of everything she has woven.

'When I look back at them I'm usually taken straight back to the place and moment of their inspiration,' she says. Saori weaving, which is Fran's chosen style, also calls for deeper insight: 'It's a very free process that allows me to explore feelings using any colour, texture and technique that suits my mood. This makes it easier to translate an atmosphere or emotion into a piece, turning a feeling into a tangible item.'

Imagine you're back at the beach, watching the mother and child play while reliving your own memories. What tangible thing might you create? Perhaps you'll choose thread, fabric and flowers that resemble the warm golden tones of sand and the brightest blue of a winter's sky, and maybe also pops of pink and green to reflect smiles and sparkling eyes. But more than that, into the making will go the quiet certainty that memories do indeed live on – within the landscape, within each other and in the hands and hearts of generations to come.

PHOTOGRAPHY: (ABOVE) LISA WILLIMEN. (RIGHT) FRAN PIKE







Words: **Alice Elgie**
Alice is a nature-loving writer who shares words about her wandering lifestyle through hold-in-the-hand letters and recorded reflections. Find her at aliceelgie.com

Emma Pruen's latest book, Wild Self: 400 Transformational Nature Experiences in Britain, *was released in May by Wild Things Publishing. Find her on Instagram @emmalpruen or at emmapruen.com*
Find more about Rebecca Desnos' books, online courses and Natural Dye Club on Instagram @rebeccadesnos or at rebeccadesnos.com
Ellie Beck teaches online craft and creativity workshops and courses, find her on Instagram @petalplum or at petalplum.com.au
Follow Fran Pike on Instagram @constanzecreations or find her online at floatingourboat.com

PRESERVING YOUR OWN MEMORIES

Fran explains how to make a simple loom and weave a picture, wall hanging or small keepsake to treasure

- Think of a person, place or experience you'd like to preserve.
- Choose coloured threads that evoke that place, person or memories.
- Wrap warp (vertical) threads around a piece of card to form the basis of your woven fabric. Fasten the threads firmly.
- Weave between them with a needle and thread, weaving over and under the vertical threads.
- You can also add dried flowers, feathers, buttons and beads.